

*Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Edited by Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden.  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Pp. 326. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780231162494.

There is a myth afoot in the precincts of secular liberalism that says that secularization is the surest means toward sex and gender equality. This is a myth that the contributors to *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* engage through a wide-ranging, global examination of the ways in which secularism does—and in some cases does not—lead to sex and gender equality. “Increasingly,” editors Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden note, “women and sexuality take center stage in invocations of the secular, which promises—or threatens—to liberate both from religion’s tenacious hold” (3). In this context, Cady and Fessenden and the contributors to this volume want to “shift the paradigm away from the sexual clash of—and within—civilizations, which presents secularism as the answer to the problem of the regulation of sexuality and gender by religious forces,” by asking: “[H]ow might we instead begin to see religion’s hold on sexuality as itself a feature of secular rule? How has the secular, and not only the religious, settled on sexual governance as the arena of conflict between them?” (9) The answers that the contributors provide involve a complex mixture of privatized religion, essentializing naturalism, secularized Christianity, moralized history, imagined universality, and antisexist patriarchy—often in service of nationalist sovereignty, religious freedom, and secular liberal tolerance. All of these concepts—and more—are interrogated and problematized in the essays that form this collection.

The departure point for most, if not all, of the essays in the volume is a lead essay by the noted American historian of France, Joan Wallach Scott, titled “Secularism and Gender Equality.” In her widely discussed volume *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) and elsewhere, Scott has written of the complex brew of religion, race, and secularism in historical and contemporary debates. There and here, Scott describes how the wearing of headscarves and veils by French Muslim women evinces a particular blend of choice and “religiously inspired individual agency” (35) in a religious practice intended, drawing on Saba Mahmood, “not as a means of expressing a self, but of embodying a virtuous practice” (36)—a phenomenon that she analogizes to the religious motivations and movements that animated first-wave feminism among Christian women in Europe and, particularly, the United States. In France and elsewhere, Scott argues, “The women’s goal is not to force everyone to do as they do, but to be recognized as legitimate members of a national community” (38). This poses a particular problem for the putatively secular state, for as Scott observes, “Although the fight is about religious expression in public places, the neutrality of the state is assumed. Indeed, bans on headscarves are taken to be a violation of state neutrality and of the citizen’s freedom of religious conscience” (38). Beyond the specifics of the headscarf and veil debates, Scott points to a larger problem in the interaction of secular states with religion, and particularly Western states with Islam—namely, “the displacement of the problem onto unacceptable other societies with other kinds of social organization” (42–43).

Another leading figure in contemporary secularism debates, and the contributor of the volume’s second essay, is anthropologist Saba Mahmood. Her essay, “Sexuality and Secularism,” addresses the paradox of the “nominalist understanding of secularism,” combined with the “extension of state regulation over social and legal norms that are derived from religious doctrine” (47). This combination of avowed secularism with religious regulation is one that Mahmood identifies as characteristic of the United States, France, and Britain, among other Western societies. In these societies, Mahmood argues, “the process of secularization has entailed not so much the elimination of religion from politics or public life, but its reformulation in accord with a normative model of

religiosity—one that is amenable to the rationality of liberal political rule” (48). The culprit, or animating force, behind this strange and paradoxical blend turns out to be the Protestant Reformation—or as Mahmood describes it, summarizing and affirming a line of critique that currently enjoys wide reception in much contemporary law and religion scholarship, a “post-Protestant hermeneutical stance toward scripture and religious rituals, the retraining of moral and ethical sensibilities, as well as a linear conception of time and history” (48). Equally at fault is the much discussed “public/private split,” for Mahmood reads Scott as arguing “not merely that liberal secularism has been historically inimical to gender equality,” but also that the “opposition between the public and the private, so fundamental to the political order liberal secularism institutes, presupposes and is based on a form of gender inequality that is uniquely modern in history” (49). Protestantism and privatization—said to be related in the Protestant emphasis on religion as an internal state of conscience in the individual—are key aspects of Mahmood’s analysis that recur in other essays in the collection.

Mahmood concludes by ratifying Scott’s analysis of the way in which both “the Islamic veil and the French display of women’s sexuality are *both* expressions of the overvaluation of sexuality—particularly female sexuality—within two distinct political-moral imaginaries that are equally if differently patriarchal” (57). Moreover, Mahmood argues, “Paradoxically, for Islam it is the veil that makes explicit—available for all to see—the rules of public gendered interaction, which are in no way contradictory and which declare sexual exchanges out of bounds in public space” (57).

Rounding out the book’s first section are two further essays that respond to Scott. Azza Karam provides an analysis of women’s rights activists in Egypt, particularly the role of Muslim religious feminists, in ways that echo the analogies that Scott draws between the activities of contemporary Muslim feminist activists and those of Christian first-wave feminists in the West (60). American religious historian Ann Braude compares the situation of American women activists with that of Muslim women around the world, concluding with the important observation that “when religion and modernity are considered to be in opposition it is most often women who pay the price” (76).

A second section, “Gender and the Privatization of Religion,” begins with Gene Burns’s essay on Roman Catholic negotiations with secular liberalism. Burns points out how “secular liberalism allows new spaces for illiberal religion” (83), as well as the way in which the “*social* nature of inequality can persist even when liberalism removes such *formal, legally* mandated discrimination” (91). Even so, he argues—to some extent in opposition to the essays of Scott, Mahmood, and Karam in the book’s first section—that “secular liberalism aids more than hinders progress in gender equality,” in part because “there is a greater possibility of religious ideas supporting gender equality when members of that faith live in a secular liberal state” (92). This is equally true within as well as between religious traditions. Burns gives the example of the way in which the Catholic natural law commitments to “reason and conscience” have been marshalled by “progressive Catholic theology, which emphasizes the centrality of active moral reasoning to the Catholic faith in contrast to the blind obedience of official pronouncements” (95). He even provides what seems to be a defense of Protestantism against the volume’s many detractors in arguing, “Some scholars simplistically insist that Western values such as Protestant individualism are responsible; such claims have the central problem that they imply that cultural individualism’s effect on gender relations, like some time bomb, sat dormant for centuries before having a clear social impact” (96).

In the volume’s second of two Egypt-focused essays, leading scholar of contemporary Muslim feminisms Margot Badran argues that, in Egypt, “while secularization made possible certain gains for women, it also reinscribed gender inequality” (104). Much of this occurred through changes in family law with the resulting “rise of the new nuclear family came a move away from physical control of women imposed by walls, gates, and guards ... to a new and stronger

discursive control of women enlisting religion, biology, and nature,” a shift which she describes as moving from a “largely material or physical control of urban upper- and middle-strata women to new discursive and legal forms of patriarchal control” (104). In a provocative statement of the analogy between the privacy of woman and religion and the publicity of man and state—another of the volume’s major themes—Badran argues, “While secularization produced another female cloistering mechanism, this time encompassing *all* women within the confines of the legally constructed nuclear family, it also initiated the confinement of religion (however imperfect) to the private/family sphere” (106–07). It does not escape Badran’s analysis, as other essays in the volume also note, that this effect is heavily class determined with upper- and middle-class women, the ones who would have the most to gain from the secularization and gender equality myth, being the ones who end up becoming in some ways the most entrapped by secularization’s effects (107).

Zilka Spahić-Šiljak’s essay on the status of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina before and after the end of the socialist state is in some ways the most damning indictment of secularization’s effects on gender equality, as women seem to have clearly fared better under the socialist commitment to gender equality than they have in the postsocialist era, which, in Spahić-Šiljak’s description “freed both ethnonational and ethnoreligious elites to pursue an aggressive policy of so-called retraditionalization of gender roles, which relegates women almost entirely to the private domain of the family” (121). She describes the current situation of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina as being based on “a religious model of complementarity between women and men—a model that renders supposed parity in the form of hierarchy” (122).

A third section of the book, “Gender, Sexuality, and the Body Politic,” is headlined by a remarkably wide-ranging but also powerfully synthetic essay, “Christian Secularism and the Gendering of U.S. Policy,” by Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, from their earlier “Secularisms” project, the need to “pluralize secularism to secularisms” by recognizing the “multiple religious and national contexts” within which secularisms occur (140). They mention, in particular, the “history of European Enlightenment, colonialism, and Christianity,” as well as the “Protestant secularism of the market” (140). They describe a “Christian imperial” secularism linked to Christian norms and values, including sexual regulation (140). This “Christian secularism” is, in their account, manifest in the U.S. in the constitutional law on religion (140–41), the “recurrent obsession with sex in U.S. public life” (145), and even foreign policy based on “Christian realism,” the last of which they take up through a striking analysis of Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s writings on foreign policy and sexuality, which turn out to have deep connections (147–60). They look forward in the end to social changes in which “sexuality will itself become a space of openness, rather than moral collateral for the man of war” (166).

There is always a risk in reviewing an anthology of this size and scope that one will give short shrift to the volume’s later chapters. With this in mind, it should be noted that the final two sections contain provocative essays by Molly K. McGarry on crimes of “moral turpitude,” particularly with respect to immigration and the preservation and policing of national borders; by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, echoing Scott’s on French laïcité and the “*hijabniqabburqa* complex”; by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd on the global politics of secularism and the notion that some women need to be “rescued by law”; by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan on Brahmin widow and female religious agency in Indian literature; and, finally, by David Kyuman Kim on the question of “authority” and women who opt to work from within religious traditions.

There are important points in the gender and secularism debates to lift out from each of these chapters. McGarry’s essay analyzes the sexualization of moral discourse, particularly questions of the definition of “moral turpitude,” which she repeatedly links to Protestant understandings of morality (176), democracy (177), religiosity (179), and values (179). Guénif-Souilamas coins

the heuristically valuable term “antisexist patriarchy” (195) to describe the way in which French legislators have pitted gender equality against religious freedom to save particularly veiled Muslim women from their choices and provides some memorable depictions of normative French masculinity through the images of “colorful ties and shiny shoes” and “impeccable suits and colorful ties” (203). Is the colorful tie to normative French masculinity what the concealing veil is to Muslim French femininity when it comes to gendered cultural expression? Related to Guénif-Souilamas’s “antisexist patriarchy” is the set of concerns that Hurd raises about the notion of religious women being “rescued by law” in the global politics of secularism—a phenomenon that she proposes to address through “critical international law and sociolegal studies” (212). Rajan’s essay on Brahmin women in India is another of the volume’s essays, along with Badran’s essay on Egypt, raising important considerations of class, specifically the effects of gendered secularism on religiously observant upper-caste women and on the tendency of some scholarship to overlook the religious dimensions of the caste system and its effects on women (and men) of lower castes. Kim proposes a politics of love and humility and the need, in a religiously plural world that admits no easy cosmopolitanism, for religious individuals to risk “*a willingness to become unintelligible to others*” (272) in their religious identities.

These essays unsettle the notion that secularism necessarily leads to gender equality. That there is any connection at all between secularism and sexuality—or “sexularism,” to adopt the term coined in a key Joan Wallach Scott essay on the topic—may be a new concept for some in the law and religion community. But these essays richly attest to the need for constant monitoring and further study of the effects not only of religion but also of secularism, in matters of gender and sexuality.

*M. Christian Green*

*Center for the Study of Law and Religion, Emory University*